

Geography as a tool to address uncertainty in modern civil-war analysis

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Introduction

This article consists in a reflection on geopolitical-analysis methodology. It seeks to highlight how geography as a discipline can assist the geopolitical researcher in recognizing, and dealing with, uncertainty while analyzing a present-day civil war.

Geographic rigor as a safeguard against political uncertainty

Almost any definition of traditional geography makes use of the epithet “physical”. The latter is in reference to earth’s surface itself, as well as to the distribution of humans and their tangible activities on said surface. Physicists from different political backgrounds can observe geographic realities and agree.

An intrastate conflict involves many considerations about which that can’t be said. They include: ideological aspiration and likely future intentions of each camp; each warring camp’s tactical aggressiveness, and the geopolitical motivations behind it; degree of loyalty between smaller groups within a given coalition; level of popular support; susceptibility to corruption of various actors; international and domestic funding networks supporting each group;

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distinction between unarmed civilians and armed militants; whether or not an armed group is to be regarded as terrorist; the probable length of time a conflict can be expected to last; the probability of a negotiated settlement between the main warring camps; possible diplomatic paths to follow so as to help bring the violence to an earlier end; etc.

The above-listed parameters belong in geopolitical analysis, but generally fall outside of traditional geography's purview. Observers from different political backgrounds would encounter tremendous difficulty agreeing on any of them.

Said differently, even though "uncertainty [...] is almost universally present in geographic information" (ZHANG and GOODCHILD 21 Feb. 2002), the error component in non-geographic parameters is of a much greater order of magnitude than in traditional geography. This stark contrast gives rise to many possible interplays between traditional geography and non-geographic considerations. It is an opportunity—often underutilized—for the geopolitical analyst interested in minimizing uncertainty embedded in their understanding of a civil war.

Our topic "Uncertainty and Geographic Knowledge" suggests indeed, through its phrasing, that the uncertainty to be identified, addressed and managed by the researcher, is not itself necessarily geographic in the strictest sense.

Because of geographic knowledge's relatively less uncertain character, it is in a position to furnish fresh clues to the geopolitical scholar interested in reducing the uncertainty interfering with their analysis of a given conflict as a whole. If resorted to methodically, geographic indications can shed light and act as a tie breaker between two possible interpretations. They can help visualize a standoff and offer insights into some of the recurring principles that underlie the tumult.

Said differently, geographic knowledge can be tapped into for the purpose of deciding outstanding questions associated with a conflict.

The main sources of uncertainty in intrastate-conflict analysis

The main sources of uncertainty encountered while analyzing a modern civil war, are as follows:

(i) the sheer complexity inherent in the political reality on the ground. Beneath an apparent polarization often lies a more intricate reality. Each camp is likely made of a large number of small groups whose commitment is not uniform;

(ii) the velocity of change. In addition to daily fluctuations in battle lines, some actors' allegiances and incentives switch and evolve in a very swift manner with the passage of time. In the digital-information age, splintering of existing groups also can be rapid;

(iii) the lack of physical access by scholars and reliable journalists. Owing to security reasons, on-the-ground field research is very difficult to nearly impossible. Moreover, those select few observers who do somehow gain access have an incentive to portray their mobility as being wider and more representative than it actually is. Said more crudely, when access to field research is greatly limited, it is easier for a researcher to spin and conceal based on their own preferred bias. Only wide access to field research can give rise to a healthy competition among points of view and thereby produce a more balanced picture in the end. This seldom is the case in a civil war;

(iv) the porosity of national borders. Especially as a result of globalization in recent decades, almost all civil wars today are affected by large and swift flows across borders. That international dimension of almost all intrastate conflicts means that foreign states and non-state actors alike, will be bound to ignore official borders and take part in the civil war to some extent or other. Lethal equipment, volunteer fighters, mercenaries, covert military advisers, medical-assistance vehicles, commercial commodities and cash do cross borders, even when an embargo is officially in place;

(v) conventional wisdom. The latter is often misleading. In a time when many large-scale structural changes are gradually materializing in world affairs (rise of China and India; the U.S.' reluctance to use land power abroad; weakening of Europe; détente with Iran; the Saudi monarchy's increasing political frailty; global warming; etc.), commonly-accepted intuition is increasingly belied by empirical data. If the scholar allows tacit assumptions influenced by conventional wisdom to make it into their reasoning, they run the risk of injecting additional noise—or, uncertainty—into their final analysis.

(vi) the partiality and/or opacity of state-sponsored sources.

Each of the six phenomena above contributes to adding to the uncertainty embedded in any assertion or assumption an analyst will contemplate making regarding a present-day intrastate conflict.

Official state discourse as a source of uncertainty

Source (vi) cited above is often neglected by present-day geopolitical analysts. The latter are often tempted to take

official state discourse at face value.

Every power's leadership has—on occasion, at least—strong incentives to mislead its public. History is rich with examples. There always is a potential chasm between what a state says and what it does, regardless of the country. The geopolitical analyst therefore must be skeptical about what each capital and its various ministries assert publicly. In that regard, thorough geographic inquiry can prove a useful tool to offset the potential bias and distortion emanating from state-sponsored sources.

A military intervention's actual war aim, for instance, is very seldom stated explicitly by the state initiating it. Independent geographic scrutiny helps to diminish the uncertainty associated with that particular area.

If no independent geographic investigation is undertaken, inaccuracy associated with the very premise of a military intervention may easily compound and, to use a standard phrase, “propagate” into other analytical issues connected to the analyzed conflict.

Instead of taking the intervening government's comments at face value, the more robust method is to turn to geographic scrutiny. The latter involves a comparatively much lesser amount of uncertainty than that embedded in political rhetoric, and thus helps weed out unnecessary noise in the conclusions drawn, and minimize error propagation.

In a more tactical world, geographic knowledge as the only reliable canvas

The cost to the U.S. of its Iraq and Afghanistan wars were so vast, the world's number-one military superpower has now become much less likely to commit ground troops in theaters of war abroad.

Mainly—but not solely—as a result of that seachange, world

powers have become more reluctant to resort to textbook use of land power abroad. Application of force on the ground is now relegated to weak-state armies, small-scale interventions, and non-state actors.

From a *realpolitik* perspective, on-the-ground actors being weaker or of a smaller size means that buck-passing and tactical-alliance opportunities vary more widely with respect to space. Hence, the much greater likelihood of “contradictory” or “counterintuitive” alliances and clashes. What appears logical in one territory, can easily be contradicted someplace else at the very same time.

Within the scope of the above-described dynamic, actual behavior on the ground is better explained by parochial interests and opportunistic calculus, than professed ideology. Realism and rigor demand that close heed be paid to the latter. Since pressures and opportunities vary greatly with respect to territory, the analyst must always ask the question ‘where’. One must specify which geographic territories a given actor’s strategy applies to.

Said differently, geography often trumps ideology. It is almost impossible to formulate an incisive analysis, unless it is anchored to geography.

If a robust sense of geography, qualitatively speaking, is missing in the analyst’s reasoning, it will quickly be eaten up by error and noise. To keep the uncertainty component in check, the analyst must ask “where?” at every step.

Conclusion

The remarks laid out above can be summarized into two potentially useful ideas in terms of civil-war-analysis methodology:

(i) Geographic knowledge can help clarify, and sometimes decide, a non-geographic question (what might be the actual

war aim of a given military intervention?; what recent event might have turned a given territory into a hotbed of resentment and extremism?; etc.);

(ii) Every assertion describing actors' policy without specifying the geographic location runs the risk of introducing additional uncertainty and vagueness in the overall analysis. That uncertainty might compound and propagate until the analysis' conclusion—while apparently cogent—becomes void of pertinence. As a consequence, it is nowadays necessary to continuously attach ones reasoning to specific territory.

Any analysis conducted without a strong, qualitative knowledge of the war's geography, runs the risk of allowing in much uncertainty and vagueness. That uncertainty might compound and propagate until the analysis' conclusion—while apparently cogent—becomes void of pertinence.

Maintaining geographic consciousness is the only means of staying in touch with the realpolitik often displayed by actors on the ground.

References

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